



# ENGAGING WITH CULTURE; STAYING FAITHFUL TO TRUTH

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**BART WOODHOUSE EXPLORES WAYS TO ENGAGE EVANGELISTICALLY, WHIST REMAINING FAITHFUL TO BIBLICAL TRUTH, WITHIN CONTEMPORARY CULTURE**

Many volumes have been written over the years about mission and evangelism; much of this has been very helpful, but some has been less so. What follows here is not an attempt to present some finished strategy or comprehensive understanding of these huge topics, but rather a brief glance at some specific areas I feel need highlighting. In our current cultural and domestic ecclesial climate, we need to affirm our faithfulness to the foundational doctrines that are the very *raison d'être* of evangelism. Firstly, that of sin, where grace is the divinely generous response to our desperate need; secondly, that this grace is a costly and demanding 'free gift'; thirdly, that we must surrender to the Lord's pattern of mission; and fourthly, that holiness keeps us distinct and yet 'fragrant' in a post-truth society. This list is far from exhaustive, but reclaims the idea of sin, judgment, and righteousness, and that the Holy Spirit

takes the lead in revealing these to the world, just as Jesus taught (John 16.13).

**SPEAKING OF SIN ...**

The central message of the gospel remains the gracious forgiveness of our sins through faith in Jesus, his atoning death on the cross, and his authenticating bodily resurrection, making a way for us to enter a new, transformed and transforming, present and yet eternal life. This core message hinges on the issue of human rebellion and sin, and the desire of an eternally loving God to restore both humanity and creation to its divinely intended function and relationship. Sin, therefore, is the problem that needs to be acknowledged before the news of 'Easter' becomes authentically 'good'.

There is, in some quarters, a tendency to make the news 'good' by other means, which avoids, or seeks to reframe, the challenge of sin. This is motivated in part by our current cultural milieu, where sin is a difficult concept to grasp and carries a huge amount of negative baggage which most people choose not to unpack. (See Alan Mann's *Atonement for a 'Sinless' Society* (Paternoster:2005).

Much of our recent missional thinking and strategy has consciously or unconsciously sought to downplay, distort, or even erase, the notion of sin. This has been motivated, with much integrity, by a desire to see people discover the love of God in Jesus, but it has also served to undermine the nature of that love and the way in which the gospel functions as 'Good News'. Often the gospel is recrafted as a palatable, attractive, consumable, spiritual 'self-help' strategy competing within the malaise of a consumerist culture. This thinking seems to demonstrate a perceived need to simply outwit culture and present an acceptable God with a familiar message, using trigger words of 'love', 'inclusive', 'welcome' and 'affirming'. All these terms are not out of place within the New Testament and the gospel, but they arrive divested of their biblical roots and instead champion another meaning, one which the dominant culture has crafted.

Our language is always on the move so to speak, but the gospel remains eternal and universal. We need to learn how to stay afloat in the flow of our cultural environment without being carried

downstream, and this requires effort and imagination. Sin and its consequences remains the key understanding that frames the gospel that follows; here we need to push against the cultural flow with honesty and humility, so that the cross is encountered as meeting a devastating personal and corporate need before a holy God.

Without doubt, sin has lost its potency as a term in both our mission and our post-Christian society, and yet 'sin' remains the central human problem that can only be addressed by the work of the cross. Whilst 'sin' may not communicate the seriousness of the human condition in a way it once did, human depravity, anxiety, aggression, emptiness, loneliness, and shame are as evident and pressing as ever. The Enlightenment fuelled a 'progressive project' which has sought to address these conditions of humanity with the secular diet of science, education, and social reform. However, as Mark Sayers develops in his recent book, *Reappearing Church*,

*The West's crude secularist-progressive map contains a post-Christian revivalist framework, one in which Christianity itself is the heresy needing to be jettisoned before we can be revived as individuals and culture ... built around the belief that history will end with a human-powered social utopia and the potential of human perfectibility. Yet this post-Christian revivalist belief is having its own moment of doubt. (Mark Sayers, Reappearing Church(Moody: 2019), p.27)*

It is this 'moment of doubt' in the secular project that creates a renewed search for a satisfying and authentic antidote to the root cause of human disfunction and regression, or theologically speaking, sin. As Sayers goes on to argue, we may on one level live in a tumultuous and hostile society within the west, but on the other hand we are seeing the secular project begin to fail in its promise, becoming instead a source of deep social anxiety and division.

The task of the evangelist is to throw the seed of the gospel on this newly broken soil, reintroducing individuals and society to the notion of God, supreme and sovereign, of human purpose

and identity in the light of God, and that the cause of our longing, anxious, and dysfunctional inner-self is the outworking of our disconnected nature, primarily from God, and symptomatically from each other.

We are back at the simple evangelist's line, 'We all have a God-shaped hole in our hearts that only God can fill'; that our sin is a symptom of our broken relationship with God, brought about in all humanity by a universal and intrinsic rejection and rebellion against him.

The news becomes 'good' because our denial and rebellion against God, and the myriad of spiritual, human, and material consequences have been taken up by Jesus on the cross - our sin as both cause and symptom is painfully endured and conquered by God incarnate. What the secular post-Christian society has failed to deal with, Jesus already has, and the reception of this cross-won reality is ours in as much as we exercise our freewill, in the sacrifice and vulnerability of choosing a relational, trusting, faith in this self-giving act of Jesus. This surrendered moment of accepting the work that Jesus has done 'in our place', brings the inner realisation of sin's true destructive and toxic nature and the Holy Spirit making our repentant transformation a real and authentic ongoing experience. This transformation then spills out collectively as we 'incarnate' the redemptive presence of Christ acting in the world through us: co-labouring with Christ in love of our broken world in the power of the Spirit.

We may be entering turbulent times for a variety of reasons, but despite the stormy cultural waters, this may prove to be the first crack in a fragmenting secular social progressivism that has dominated our society for many decades. Is this moment ripe for revival? A surrendered, repentant, and prayerful church sharing a simple gospel with confidence and authentic love will find out. A gospel that speaks to human need, to human brokenness, to the sin that we can escape no other way, only by trusting (believing) in the work of Jesus on the cross and choosing (repenting) to walk his path.

### GRACE IS COSTLY ...

We also need to communicate and affirm an appreciation of the mystery of 'Holy Love': making clear that it is not merely a reflection of human love; it will surprise and shock us. It will not be tamed and become a servant to our wants and socially expedient demands. 'Holy Love' eternally remains a holy expression of God's nature (Deuteronomy 33:3; Psalm 25; John 3:16-21). Indeed, human notions of love are but a dim reflection (1 Corinthians 13:12) of the love of God, revealed in Christ and made manifest through the Holy Spirit.

As some have said, John's epistle teaches us 'God is Love' (1 John 3:16), not that 'Love is God', and in the current cultural climate we need to be mindful of the difference. Grace is not our servant, but the means of entering a renewed covenant of love with God, and by this covenant, promises are made, and hearts exchanged, as we become a new creation and adopted children of God.

As Paul had to remind those in the church at Rome (Romans 6:1-7), grace brings a new identity and not a blank cheque to excuse our persistence in an old way of life, although as Paul also said (Romans 8:1-4; Colossians 2:13-15 etc.), grace is an infinitely deep resource through the complete work of the cross. But, we cheapen it disgracefully when we live off its wealth to support aspects of our old, dying selves and the cultures we inhabit.

Our evangelism needs to articulate, carefully and clearly, that the grace of God is made possible through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, that though him and his action on our behalf we can become a new creation and adopted children of God. This framework, rooted in the New Testament, speaks of a costly grace and goes on to describe the fruit of its work within us; as the Methodist Covenant Service puts it we are 'no-longer our own but thine'. Again, Paul reminds us we have been 'bought with a price' (1 Corinthians 6:19-20); that we put down an old life in order to take up a new self in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17). Grace has value or meaning only within the context of the human condition, expressed as sin and its manifold symptoms, in contrast

to a holy God and a divine standard of intention and potential for humanity.

In a 'post-truth' culture we need to reveal the mysterious truth of grace, with articulate humility, that it is both an experiential relief and embrace, but also a costly surrender. The encounter with Christ through the Holy Spirit connects us with both the attractiveness of a new, shame free, and meaningful life, and the dwarfing sense of awe at the nature and power of the giver and the gift. Grace understood correctly is both a free gift and an eternally captivating mystery, in that our freedom from sin is entered into by surrendering ourselves to the covenantal love of God - we are no longer our own but belong to him. In the afterglow of the postmodern revolution, and the strange vacuum of meaning left in its wake, we have an obligation to manifest in action and words the nature of truth, purpose and identity as revealed by Christ's 'resurrection life' within us, and his death on a cross for us. In that, we are now able to become the children of the living God, complete with a deep sense of hope, assurance of identity, an empowered purpose, humble authority, and being held by a captivating love. We become as we belong, we triumph as we surrender, we live as we die, and we receive as we give. Grace is a costly adventure that cannot be tamed or understood by the conventions of our culture, and it remains uniquely attractive as a result.

A final warning. The church has played its part in distorting the potency and mystery of grace by either edging towards a dead orthodoxy or by making it the grounds for unrepentant freedom. Both have their distinct idol-making capacity, and both result in a dying church. The pursuit of good doctrine can unconsciously begin to use man-made 'bricks and bitumen' in its unintended tower building, and our desire for God's love can take a less mysterious and costly route, as we are unwittingly guided by our own reflection in the dim mirror (1 Corinthians 13:12). Our evangelism must again be founded on the Wesleyan development of grace as prevenient, saving, and transforming, with each divine move requiring only an ever more surrendered heart!





## GOD IS IN CHARGE

This is God's mission. We have often given lip service to this truth, whilst developing our next clever and culturally literate strategy, retrospectively acknowledging the Holy Spirit's role in the process! God is gracious and meets us in all our efforts to live out the command to make disciples, but I sense that revival demands a repentant and surrendered position towards the Holy Spirit. After all it's the job of the Holy Spirit to convince the world with regard to sin, righteousness, and judgment (John 16.8), not ours! Leslie Newbigin helpfully points out:

*God opens the heart of a man or woman in the gospel. The messenger (the 'angel' of Acts 10:3) may be a stranger, a preacher, a piece of Scripture, a dream, an answered prayer, or a deep experience of joy or sorrow, of danger or deliverance. It was not part of any missionary 'strategy' devised by the church. It was the free and sovereign deed of God, who goes before his church. And like Peter, the church can usually find good reasons for being unwilling to follow. But follow it we must, if it is to be faithful. For the mission is not ours but God's. (Lesslie Newbigin, The Open Secret (1995: Eerdmans), p.64)*

The humbling supernatural reach of God's voice in his prevenient grace should be magnified in the focus of our prayer life as we partner with him, adding our hearts and voice to his. Revival is a spiritual atmosphere created mysteriously in the weaving together of our surrendered hearts and voices in prayer with his heart and voice over our communities and nation.

We follow his lead in mission, which will likely be counter-cultural and costly, although as we are led by the Spirit we will undoubtedly discover him in places and contexts we never expected. Effective evangelism is born out of prayer not strategy; it is the Holy Spirit who

prompts the human heart to consider sin, righteousness, and judgement (John 16:8) and to be opened to his voice speaking through us and his powerful love shown in our witness.

### RELEVANT HOLINESS

Since the command of Jesus was first given to 'go and make disciples of all nations' the complexities relating to language and culture have both informed and distracted the church in its mission. As we take this opportunity to rediscover and affirm a 'Wesleyan' and evangelical pattern of mission and evangelism, we need to be mindful of the dangers present in attempting to engage with culture; as Lesslie Newbigin

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famously stated, 'In the attempt to be 'relevant' one may fall into syncretism, and in the effort to avoid syncretism one may become irrelevant' (Lesslie Newbigin, Foolishness to the Greeks (1986: SPCK), p.7).

Wesley's development of 'holiness' or 'entire sanctification' provides a useful foundation to help us navigate between these two dangers. On the one hand, Wesleyan holiness expects Holy Spirit inspired transformation, changes in behaviour and attitude, that reflect the nature of Christ in us, and this process often has a radically 'counter-cultural' flavour. On the other hand, the dynamism of, and dependence on, grace rather than any form of religious self-righteous practice, generates an infectious lived witness and authentic expression of God's love. The Holy Spirit overtaking, overcoming, both working in us and through us, to reveal an irresistible Kingdom. Holiness, expressed as our gracious acceptance in Christ producing the transformative outworking of grace by the Holy Spirit, must be continually affirmed as the foundation of our gospel as we engage in evangelism.

Our evangelism needs to hold confidently to the truth of a wholistic gospel, that both offers the wonder of God's love and grace, and the restoration of our identity as a holy people. Our witness then becomes an expression of holiness in the everyday of life, joy in the face of difficulty, love in the face of hate, integrity in the face of temptation, displaying the nature of our relationship with Jesus in context. Our behaviour reveals the inner glow and attractiveness of the Holy Spirit shining through a person's life in a way that language cannot compete with. The effects of light and salt are difficult to argue with, and so is the witness of 'love without sin' (John Wesley, Sermon - The Scripture Way of Salvation).

This manner of witness can bridge some surprisingly wide cultural divisions, challenging and overcoming the limits and transgressions of cultural translation in the immediacy and integrity of a Holy Spirit filled life bearing witness to Jesus and the gospel. Holiness expresses the uniqueness and sovereignty of the

kingdom whilst displaying the universal attractiveness of God's holy love in the outworking of the Holy Spirit's sanctifying and affirming presence. A strangely relevant voice of witness, challenging yet affirming all who are open and seeking something beyond the fray of competing truths and abyssal anxiety.

We haven't the space here to explore this in any detail, but the recent explosion of interest in Jordan Peterson's work regarding purposeful meaning, responsibility, and the personal need for connection to a bigger story demonstrates something in our culture that hungers for what we might describe as 'relational holiness'. As Peterson lays out, in a world of growing complexity and confusion, there is an increasing thirst for something both transcendent and secure, but also deeply intimate and relationally satisfying - a connection with a sense of purpose and love that transforms our worldview by both making sense and drawing us beyond cultural norms and limits into another deeper reality (Jordan Peterson, 12 Rules of Life: An Antidote to Chaos (Allen Lane Publishers: 2018)). Peterson reflects a mode of thinking that questions postmodern culture, and thereby also raises questions of our well-meaning missiology. Indeed, a missiology that has cleverly placated our emerging culture with a pseudo-native 'Good-News' narrative that merely echoes the ideological values and hopes with which it's being presented. Indeed, we could note with some irony that Peterson has won, with a direct and uncompromising tone, more 'converts' to a broadly biblically-informed overview of life's purpose and meaning than any of the church's 'pioneering' attempts.

In this brief glance at how best to engage with our culture as evangelists, we have prioritised the need for a lived witness of integrity, that earths holiness in the everyday. But we also need to affirm, in line with 1 Peter 3:15, the need always to be ready to give an answer to 'everyone who asks us to give the reason for the hope we have'. Personal experience and testimony continue to be the most significant and potent means of evangelism, but only remain so when founded on a discipleship that reflects the light of holiness (1 Peter 2:9).

John Finney lays out a good starting point when describing a balanced and yet confident pattern of evangelism when he writes '[evangelism] goes where people are and listens, binds together prayer and truth, celebrates the goodness and complexity of life as well as judging the sinfulness of evil, and sees truth as something to be done and experienced as well as intellectually believed. It walks in humility' (John Finney, Recovering the Past (1996: Darton, Longman & Todd), p.47).

Let's stay true to this walk of evangelism in an age that that needs, as much as ever, to hear the Good News of the gospel of Christ Jesus.

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